

## Repression and autocracy as Russia heads into State Duma elections

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# SWP Comment

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## Repression and Autocracy as Russia Heads into State Duma Elections

*Sabine Fischer*

Russia is experiencing a wave of state repression ahead of parliamentary elections on 19 September 2021. The crackdown is unusually harsh and broad, extending into previously unaffected areas and increasingly penetrating the private sphere of Russian citizens. For years the Russian state had largely relied on the so-called “power vertical” and on controlling the information space through propaganda and marginalisation of independent media. The political leadership, so it would appear, no longer regards such measures as sufficient to secure its power and is increasingly resorting to repression. The upshot is a further hardening of autocracy. Even German NGOs are experiencing growing pressure from the Russian state. This trend cannot be expected to slow, still less reverse in the foreseeable future.

Repression — wherever it occurs — involves restrictions (of civil rights and liberties) and physical violence. Russia has seen a string of political assassinations and assassination attempts over the past decades. The poisoning of Alexei Navalny is only the most recent case, following on the spectacular murder of Boris Nemtsov in February 2015 and numerous other attacks at home and abroad. In Russia’s Chechen Republic, Ramzan Kadyrov has entrenched violence against opponents and civil society as the foundation of his power.

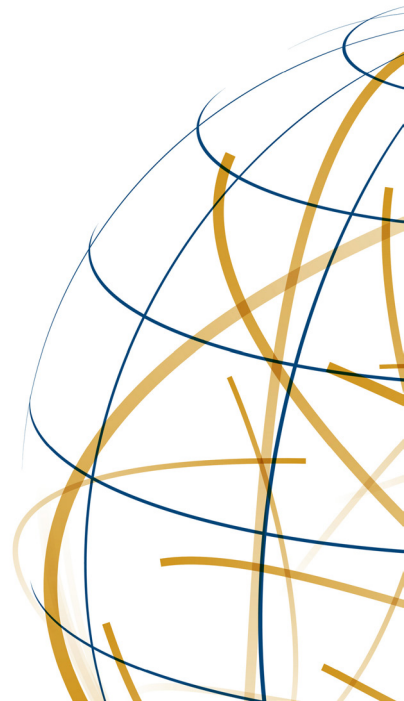
Few of these crimes have been properly investigated, and the Russian state denies any involvement or responsibility. Security forces crush protests. Torture is commonplace in Russian prisons. Civil rights and liberties are heavily curtailed. Both forms

of repression — restrictions and violence — have increased noticeably in recent months. The state continues to rely primarily on the former but has also expanded its use of the latter.

### What Is New?

Three aspects are new. The measures are, firstly, much larger-scale. During the nationwide demonstrations in late January and early February 2021 alone more than 11,500 individuals were detained. Protestors were subjected to violence and detainees’ rights were violated. The security forces also cracked down on journalists.

Since January several thousand administrative penalties have been issued in con-



nection with the protests. The proportion of “administrative detentions” (compared to fines) has jumped in comparison to earlier years. More than 130 criminal investigations have been initiated and a number of long prison sentences already imposed. The “offences” included participation in unauthorised demonstrations, violation of administrative and Covid prevention rules, and inciting minors to join protests. Action against social media likes and reposts about the protests has also been stepped up. The human rights organisation OVD-Info, which documents abuses and provides legal support, states that: “The scale of detentions, administrative and criminal prosecution in connection with the protests in January-February 2021 is undoubtedly the largest in the entire history of modern Russia.”

The protests were triggered by the detention of opposition politician Alexei Navalny after he returned to Moscow on 17 January 2021. On 2 February a Moscow court sentenced him to two years and eight months imprisonment for violating parole from an earlier sentence — which the European Court of Human Rights had already declared politically motivated and called on the Russian government to rescind.

State institutions and Navalny’s nationwide teams published widely diverging estimates of the size of the demonstrations between January and April. Photographs prove that thousands of people took to the streets on 23 and 31 January in more than 120 Russian cities. These were thus the biggest demonstrations since the mass protests against election fraud in 2011/12.

Secondly, repression has expanded to target organisations and groups that were previously largely untouched. The arrest of the well-known lawyer Ivan Pavlov on accusations of disclosing confidential information caused consternation, for example. Pavlov is the head of Team 29, a group of lawyers working to uphold civil rights that also represented Navalny’s Anti-Corruption Foundation (Fond Borby s Korruptsii, FBK). His arrest was understood as signalling an expansion of state repression to include

lawyers. In mid-April the Moscow state prosecutor applied to have the FBK and other organisations associated with Navalny designated as “extremist organisations”. In parallel the State Duma amended the law on “extremist organisations” which now prevents their members from standing in elections (even if their membership ended before designation). On 9 June the FBK, Navalny’s regional offices and his Citizens’ Rights Protection Foundation were — as expected — classified as “extremist”, with far-reaching political and legal consequences not only for activists but potentially also for hundreds of thousands of private donors. Anticipating this outcome, FBK had already dissolved its nationwide structures on 29 April to shield its staff.

Independent media have also come under pressure. Three editors of the student newspaper *DOXA* were charged in mid-April with inciting minors to participate in the pro-Navalny protests and have been under house arrest since then. In May two prominent independent Russian-language media outlets, *Meduza* and *V-Times*, were declared “foreign agents”.

More than ninety organisations are currently classified as “foreign agents” and face existential challenges. They are required to display the designation prominently in all public statements, with the intention of discrediting them. They are also subject to heightened bureaucratic scrutiny, which ties up time and resources and is especially burdensome for smaller organisations and natural persons. The label deters Russian donors and targeted entities quickly find themselves in existential financial difficulties. *Meduza* responded with a crowdfunding campaign that attracted 80,000 donors within the space of just a few days. Other media, organisations and individuals lack such capacities. *V-Times* announced on 3 June that it was closing down. The state campaign against *Meduza*, *V-Times* and *DOXA* represents a bitter setback for Russia’s independent media landscape.

Thirdly, in a departure from previous practice, the state is increasingly encroaching on the private sphere and turning its attention to the politically unorganised. Since the protests at the beginning of the year hundreds of citizens across the country have been visited by the security forces at home or work and warned, summonsed, fined or detained. Moscow's public CCTV systems have been used for large-scale facial recognition for the first time. These measures also affect citizens who did not actually participate in the protests, with security forces questioning neighbours and family members. Numerous dismissals across the country were apparently associated with participation in or mobilisation for the protests. The most spectacular case involved about one hundred employees of the Moscow metro, who lost their jobs in mid-May for supporting the protests.

The repression has been accompanied by a wave of new legislation designed to hamper opposition and civil society activities and expand the state's scope for repression. At the end of 2020 it was made possible to designate natural persons as "foreign agents" if they receive financial support from abroad. The right to demonstrate has been further curtailed and new possibilities have been created to suppress political speech in the internet and social media. A new law on education came into effect at the beginning of June to control the discussion and dissemination of political issues in education, training and scientific contexts, as well as international research collaborations. The laws on "extremist" and "undesirable" organisations were also drastically toughened in June.

All the while the pressure on opposition politicians grows. Many have left the country, most recently the former Duma deputy Dmitry Gudkov. As the expanding extent and changing quality of state repression in recent months demonstrates, the state is no longer limiting itself to clamping down on prominent opponents.

## Why Now?

The proximate cause of the clampdown is the Duma election on 19 September 2021. The state is bulldozing anything that could be regarded as a political alternative to the ailing ruling party United Russia.

The root cause, however, is the protracted legitimacy crisis of the Russian political system. Its roots lie in the simultaneity of societal modernisation and political autocratisation that has characterised the relationship between state and society since the 2000s. The contradictions were initially masked by economic growth and increasing prosperity. That phase ended with the economic crisis of 2008/09 and the suppression of mass protests during the 2011/12 Duma and presidential elections.

Traditionalism, nationalism, strong leadership and geopolitical confrontation with the West became the central legitimising narrative of the Russian state after Vladimir Putin returned to the Kremlin in 2012 and annexed the Crimea in 2014. The wave of patriotism generated by the "Crimea effect" lasted only four years. The pension reform announced in summer 2018 was widely regarded as the state ultimately tearing up the implicit "social contract" that had offered material security in return for political passivity. Since then, the oscillation of public protest and state repression has grown increasingly fierce. Notable protests occurred in summer 2019 in Moscow around the City Duma election and from July 2020 in Khabarovsk after the sacking and detention of Governor Sergei Furgal. The protests of winter and spring 2021 represent the continuation and provisional culmination of this development.

Moreover, the sharpening legitimacy crisis sees the state increasingly concerned for its stability. So far it has failed to foster other sources of legitimacy and appears incapable of dealing with political dissent. But the widely postulated fear stalking Russia's rulers should not be overstated. The state ultimately trusts in the proven effectiveness of its instruments. From the perspective of the political leadership, for

example, the repression of 2011/12 was a success, with the protests ebbing rapidly away after the showdown on Bolotnaya Square in May 2012.

The current dynamic of repression is largely characterised by two contextual factors that have ramped up the domestic political temperature since 2020. For a time the Covid-19 pandemic appeared to threaten the constitutional reform designed to secure the existing political system and keep Putin in the presidency. The virus overshadowed the entire year, affected the Russian economy and – although the official figures are much lower – likely cost several hundred thousand lives.

But the real political bombshell of 2020 was the political crisis in neighbouring Belarus. From the very outset its protest movement became a sounding board for the hopes and fears of Russia's rulers and opposition alike. The Kremlin quickly backed Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko and indicated that "regime change" in Minsk was a red line. The "autocratic alliance" between Moscow and Minsk now appears permanent. The fall of Lukashenko, who wages war on his own population, would represent a bitter defeat and create a fatal precedent for Moscow. The two countries' domestic politics are now more closely intertwined than ever.

## Effectiveness and Consequences of the Latest Repression

From the state's perspective the repression of the first half of 2021 is already a "success". The latest surveys by the independent Levada Centre show willingness to protest declining significantly since January, while support for those who took to the streets has also fallen. Navalny's public recognition has risen since August 2020 – but not his political support. He is in prison, many of his closest collaborators have fled abroad, and his organisations are hamstrung by court verdicts and new legislation. Navalny and his collaborators will find it difficult to pursue their political goals under these conditions.

Putin's approval by contrast is back at 67 percent after a pandemic-related slump to 59 percent in spring 2020. That trend is expedited by an official narrative that the pandemic has been defeated, along with the lifting of many restrictions even during the second wave in autumn and winter 2020/21.

That does nothing to change the ongoing legitimacy crisis, which divides Russian society into a slowly growing dissatisfied minority that is willing to protest and a declining majority who continue to support the political system – however reticently – out of traditionalism, resignation or fear of change. Surveys must be interpreted with the utmost caution in authoritarian contexts like the Russian, however. It is quite possible that respondents will play down their criticisms for fear of repercussions, even in anonymous surveys. If that were the case Levada's figures, which point to about 35 percent dissatisfaction, would be an underestimate.

The Russian state's repression strategy leverages this social polarisation by boosting anti-liberal and anti-Western propaganda directed towards the traditionalist and/or change-averse majority while increasingly vigorously suppressing and silencing the critical minority willing to protest. The political leadership can even expect repression of the minority to earn it new legitimacy among sections of the majority by "protecting" them from dreaded instability. It is hard to predict where this process will lead. Much depends on whether the next generation of activists choose to move abroad or withdraw from politics – or continue to work to change the country from within despite growing risks. Willingness to emigrate has certainly increased steadily over the past decade.

Phases of repression also alter the political system. They strengthen the actors of repression, in the sense of granting the security forces greater sway within the power apparatus. In this way repression creates structural realities that are difficult to reverse. Here again this continues a trend of the past decade, which has seen the power of the security services steadily expanding.

Social change is held back by state policies designed to shore up power. Dissent is suppressed by ever harsher means: fragmented, atomised and neutralised. This mechanism also functions at the level of the political elites, whose members can regularly find themselves in the sights of political repression.

The interlocking dynamics in Russia and Belarus leave little grounds for hope of Moscow (or Minsk) dropping broad repression as an increasingly central instrument of power. Given that Moscow unconditionally supports Lukashenko's suppression of the Belarusian popular movement, the big question is whether Russia eventually might go down the Belarusian path. In any case the latest developments are associated with a clear hardening of Russian autocracy that makes opening and compromise – whether internal or external – unlikely for the indefinite future.

### **Transnational Repression – German Organisations also Affected**

On 26 May 2021 the Russian prosecutor general designated three German NGOs “undesirable”: the German-Russian Exchange (DRA), the Centre for Liberal Modernity (LibMod) and the Forum of Russian-Speaking Europeans. The Berlin-based European Platform for Democratic Elections (EPDE) had already received the label in 2018. The 2015 law on “undesirable organisations” prohibits non-Russian organisations that supposedly threaten the Russian state from operating within Russia. The law was significantly tightened to coincide with the listing of the three German organisations. It allows members of designated organisations to be prevented from entering the country and puts Russian citizens and residents who cooperate with them under the risk of criminal prosecution.

The Russian ministry of justice currently lists 34 foreign organisations as undesirable. Seventeen – or half – are American. But they also include a string of European organisations such as the European Endow-

ment for Democracy. Designated organisations are forced to cease all work in Russia immediately in order to avoid further endangering their Russian partners. This makes the latter's situation even more precarious, as the number of foreign partners and funding sources declines.

EPDE, DRA and LibMod are participants in the German-Russian Petersburg Dialogue. By banning them, the Russian leadership is signalling that its efforts to eliminate criticism and dissent will make no exceptions even for such a venerable dialogue project. There are indications from the Russian State Duma that German party-political foundations could also be targeted, specifically mentioning the Green-affiliated Heinrich Böll Foundation. The German side of the Petersburg Dialogue has suspended all joint activities until further notice, making their resumption conditional on delisting.

Moscow's action against German NGOs underlines the isolationist tendencies in Russian foreign policy and demonstrates the drastic deterioration in German-Russian relations since autumn 2020. The political crisis in Belarus and the Navalny poisoning have further chilled an already frosty relationship. The next German government will have to base its Russia policy on the assumption that the domestic political hardening will make understanding and compromise with Moscow even more difficult. At the same time this creates an almost unsolvable conflict of goals for German and European Russia policy:

The EU's five guiding principles for relations with Russia are designed to deter Russian transgressions at all levels, in the shared neighbourhood and towards the EU and its member states. They also seek to encourage and develop people to people contacts with Russian society. But the negative dynamic at the political level of the relationship severely narrows the possibilities, especially where Moscow is doing everything to isolate Russian society. This undercuts the EU's fifth principle, people-to-people contacts and support for civil society. The banning of German NGOs and suppression of the Petersburg Dialogue

demonstrate this very clearly. Germany and the EU have already had to adapt their co-operation with Russian civil society to increasingly restrictive conditions and operate with extreme sensitivity to the difficult context. The need now is to continue — however cautiously — along that path and at same time to signal to the Russian people that the EU remains genuinely interested in engaging with them.

Germany and the EU will also have to ready themselves for increasing emigration from Russia and Belarus. These people will need support. But they — like the Russian community in general — can also be important interlocutors and potential communicators into Russian society. People-to-people contacts with Russia were abruptly interrupted by the pandemic, and will remain difficult even after it is overcome. The question of visa-free travel for Russian citizens has long been a bone of contention within the EU. It now becomes crucial in order to maintain at least minimal direct contact with Russian society.

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